

Good afternoon. My name is Edna Novak, and I am the Executive Director of Teach For America in Connecticut. Thank you for this opportunity to testify today in support of Bill 6654, which would allow the State Board of Education to establish a Resident Teacher Certificate. The certification framework that this bill proposes exists in virtually every other state where Teach For America operates, and the successful passage of this bill is critical for Teach For America to continue operating our program right here in Connecticut.

I am here today – and Teach For America is here in Connecticut – because we are living in a state with the greatest achievement gap in the nation. Nowhere else in our country are the inequities so stark – between kids growing up rich vs. poor, black vs. white, Hispanic vs. white. In a state with such a strong and a rich educational history, these disparities are appalling. We have the greatest proportion of college educated citizens in the country. Our average student performance scores, graduation rates and college-bound percentages often rank among the highest in the country. We have one of the strongest state university systems and traditional teacher preparation pipelines in the nation. But the strengths of Connecticut's educational system are not shared equally by Connecticut's children. The achievement gap is larger in Connecticut than in any other state in the nation – and unfortunately, this is not because our wealthiest communities are outliers at the top of the gap, but because children growing up in Connecticut's poorest communities are at a greater disadvantage than children growing up in virtually any other state in the nation. No where else in this country does the zip-code a child happens to be born into so drastically determine his or her life prospects. This is a civil rights problem. This is the problem that Teach For America exists to solve. This is why I am here today.

Teach For America is building the movement to eliminate educational inequity by enlisting our country's most promising future leaders in the effort. We recruit, select, train, and support a corps of outstanding recent college graduates and professionals of all academic majors and career interests who commit to teach for two years or more in low-income urban and rural public schools, and through their experiences, become life-long leaders in the effort to expand educational opportunity. While in the classroom, our teachers work relentlessly to ensure that more students growing up today in our country's lowest-income communities are given the educational opportunities they deserve. Over time, our alumni become a powerful force of leaders working from inside education and from every other sector to effect the fundamental changes needed to ensure that all children have an equal chance in life.

The impact of Teach For America is two-fold. While in the classroom, our teachers go above and beyond traditional expectations to make life-changing academic gains with their students. A growing body of research speaks to the significant and positive impact of Teach For America teachers on student achievement. I am including summaries of the most recent and rigorous of these studies (Mathematica, Urban Institute, Board of Regents, Policy Studies) with the copy of my written testimony, along with responses to some older studies that question Teach For America's results in the classroom. Yet, it is not surprising to see more and more external research substantiating our impact on student achievement. Over the last two decades, we have dedicated substantial time, energy and resources into strengthening our approach to teacher preparation and development in order to maximize our impact in the classroom. Our program is data-driven and based on what we have learned over time about the knowledge, skills, and mind-sets of teachers who drive the most significant progress with their students. This has led to (a) a uniquely rigorous selection model (less than 20 percent of our applicants typically meet our admission criteria; this year, we are likely to accept just over 10 percent of applicants to our corps), (b) intense investments in our pre-service training and ongoing professional development and support, and (c) a program model and system of managing our teachers in a way that is entirely aligned with student achievement goals. The bottom line is that our corps members are making a huge impact in the classroom. One of the most recent longitudinal studies on the impact of Teach For America corps members (Urban Institute 2008) found that the incremental impact of having a Teach For America teacher was three times greater than that of having another (even veteran and traditionally certified) teacher in the same school.

The second leg of Teach For America's impact is its systemic, long-term impact on education reform. The experience of achieving significant academic gains in low-income urban and rural classrooms is transformative for our corps members. As Teach For America teachers discover through first-hand experience that it is possible to close the achievement gap, that kids growing up in poverty can achieve at absolute levels when given the opportunity, their dedication to eliminating educational inequity becomes a life-long commitment. Since Teach For America's founding in 1990, over 20,000 leaders have joined this movement. While less than 10% of them would have otherwise chosen to enter the field of education, more than two-thirds of our alumni from the last two decades are continuing to work in education today. Half are still teaching and over 400 are serving as principals. Many of our nation's most prominent education reform

organizations, such as KIPP (Knowledge is Power Program), New Leaders for New Schools, and the New Teacher Project were founded and are run by Teach For America alumni. Here in Connecticut, the majority of Achievement First's schools are led by Teach For America alumni, and our corps members and alumni comprise half of Achievement First's teaching and secondary leadership staff. Moreover, Teach For America alumni outside of education are working to directly combat some of the external challenges that were holding their students back in the classroom. Alumni like Sarah Bezek, a resident at Yale University Hospital in New Haven who is focusing her attention on emergency services for low-income families, will tell you that the path they have followed in medicine, law, policy, or business has been directly informed and inspired by the challenges that their students faced in the classroom.

Here in Connecticut, Teach For America is in the midst of its third year, with 150 teachers in the middle of their two-year commitment, reaching over 9,000 students in Bridgeport, Hartford, New Haven, and Stamford. Our student achievement data demonstrates that our impact in Connecticut classrooms has been strong and on par with Teach For America's national results (though it is worth mentioning that we would be even better able to assess our impact if there were a more robust data-system in CT which would allow us to track longitudinal data at the level of individual teachers). Moreover, among our first cohort of Teach For America – Connecticut alumni, over 90% are still working in education this year and more than 75% are still teaching beyond their two-year commitment. Our district partners and principals have been impressed by the impact of our corps members and are asking us to sustain and in some cases grow our presence. They have seen the impact of our teachers in the classroom, and are compelled by the long-term impact that our alumni will have both in and beyond the classroom over time.

However, Teach For America will not be able to continue operating in Connecticut without changes to the existing alternative certification framework and timeline. The problem with the status quo is that there is no existing certificate in this state that parallels the timeline of Teach For America's training model. We have only been able to run our program over the last two years because of a loop-hole that has allowed us to extend our certification coursework across the summer and into the first 90 days of teaching. The State Department of Education has made it clear that our use of those first 90 days for certification coursework is at risk. Moreover, in front-loading certification coursework into our summer training program in order to meet a timeline that is not aligned with Teach For America's model, existing state certification policies have

diminished the value of Teach For America's training model in the state. The Resident Teacher Certificate bill (6654) represents a well-researched, innovative framework that exists in virtually every other state where Teach For America operates. It would allow Teach For America to do what we do well – recruit, select, train, and support teachers to achieve significant academic gains in low-income classrooms – and would enable our teachers to complete certification coursework through their first year of teaching in alignment with our model of ongoing training and professional development. As in every other state where Teach For America exists, the Resident Teacher Certificate framework would also open up the door to partnerships between Teach For America and traditional higher education institutions in Connecticut, which could then partner with us in fulfilling certification requirements.

Connecticut has historically been a leader in education reform. We were among the first states in this country to recognize that there are different pathways to becoming a teacher by establishing one of our nation's first alternate routes to teacher certification. However, the landscape of our nation and state's educational system has significantly evolved since Connecticut created its original alternate route to certification over 20 years ago. The Resident Teacher Certificate is an opportunity for Connecticut to sustain its leadership in education reform and to ensure that Teach For America can continue serving children in our state's lowest-income communities. For the sake of our teachers, and more importantly, our students, I urge you to support bill 6654, an Act Establishing a Resident Teacher Certificate.